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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Col. Qaddafi, the CIA and The Post

The front-page article ["CIA Anti-Qaddafi Plan Backed," Nov. 3], regarding CIA efforts to undermine Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi, is yet another instance of The Post's periodic disregard for the national security interests of the United States. This cannot be considered quality journalism; instead, it should be viewed as a serious lack of responsibility on the part of The Post's news organization.

What possible benefit could come from making such information public? The only benefit I see is giving a terrorist such as Qaddafi another chance to draw support among other radical leaders against the United States (not to mention damaging our efforts at combating the Qaddafi web of international terrorism).

I will watch with interest for the next article in The Post about the decline of U.S. intelligence-gathering capabilities and how unfortunate it is that our government cannot keep track of possible terrorist activity around the world. It is truly shameful that The Post must place its interests in selling newspapers through sensational headlines ahead of the government's efforts at combating a crazed terrorist fanatic.

JOHN M. MOLONEY
Washington

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The Qaddafi story raises serious questions. As one who served briefly in the CIA many years ago, and more recently managed a city newspaper, I recognize that there are no simple answers.

There is an obvious injury to our national security when a story such as this one is published: Muammar Qaddafi gets a free warning, U.S. allies become doubtful about cooperation with us in intelligence matters, and the CIA's difficult task in carrying out its legally authorized mission becomes much more tricky, and more susceptible to failure.

Reporter Bob Woodward clearly has every right to dig out a story such as this, especially since U.S. government officials seem (one assumes from his quotations) only too happy to talk. But what can be The Post's rationale for electing to print such a story? What factors override the damage caused to U.S. national interests?

The Post's response would surely be that it has a compelling obligation under the First Amendment to inform the citizenry about the shenanigans of its government, letting the chips fall where they may. If it helps Qaddafi and hurts some CIA agents, that's the way the cookie crumbles.

But there are some real problems with this traditional approach. Congress, freely elected by U.S. citizens, has authorized covert action by the CIA and has created a Select Committee on Intelligence to oversee such operations. Covert action has been deemed a necessary evil in a world where our adversaries use it regularly as their major instrument of a foreign policy, which seeks to bring down the international order as we know it today. We can assume there are no Bob Woodwards in the Soviet Union or Libya performing comparable services for citizens there.

The Post, in exposing actual or potential covert actions, can obviously destroy them. Can this be its intent? Should The Post arrogate to itself the sole right to judge which secrets it will expose, no matter how harmful that exposure may be to the U.S. citizens who have, through their representatives, authorized secrecy?

I can imagine only three possible types of rationale for The Post's action:

1. The Post opposes any U.S. action against Qaddafi and hopes that exposure will end any chance of this alleged covert operation's getting off the ground.

2. The Post opposes all covert action by the CIA and believes it has a responsibility to expose and thereby thwart all such actions.

3. The Post is entirely neutral as to the conflict between Col. Qaddafi and his terrorism, on the one hand, and the interests of the American people, on the other, and further believes that its adversarial relationship to the U.S. government entitles it to print any and every secret it can get its hands on.

None of these will stand up, in my view.

Given The Post's superb record of exposing vice, inanity and ineptitude in the government, I hesitate to even raise this issue: if too many agreed with me, I would be alarmed lest a chilling effect on investigative reporting might ensue, and even that powerful voices would call for an "Official Secrets Act" such as the one which has coddled British spies and traitors over the years.

Yet, given today's climate of hostility toward the press and the danger that the First Amendment could eventually be eviscerated by the vocal right, I wonder if some degree of self-restraint by editors should not be accepted in clear-cut cases where national security is at stake.

GEORGE R. PACKARD
Washington

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As a none-too-subtle Democrat, I have often taken refuge in the pages of The Post to find support in a town where the national pastime seems to be espousing the Reagan party line. I normally find comfort in the newspaper's presentation of opposing views and willingness to go out on a limb in its quest to satisfy the public's right to know.

I find no comfort, however, in The Post's ill-advised decision to inform not only the American public but the entire world of what was obviously a highly sensitive and delicate plan to restrict the terroristic tendencies of a foreign leader. I defy The Post to provide one plausible excuse in defense of such a blatantly irresponsible use of the printed word.

In this single article The Post has no doubt rendered the plan useless, damaged the images of the president, the State Department, the intelligence agencies and the United States in general, given a powerful lunatic another excuse to terrorize Americans and probably kicked off a government witch hunt to find Mr. Woodward's sources.

The only good I can see that may have come from this article is that a front-page headline containing the words "CIA" and "Qaddafi" probably ensured the sale of a much larger number of papers at a buck a shot than usual.

Where does The Post draw the line? At what point does the safety of American individuals and indeed national security come before selling papers?

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